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ABSTRACT

Five Ohio school districts, both large and small, participated in a year-long needs assessment study, following activities specified in the Ohio Needs Assessment Guidelines. Following interviews with the needs assessment coordinator at each district, researchers summarized problem areas related to each of 15 activities corresponding to the eight major steps of the Guidelines. Activities were considered problematic if their completion required more time, money or professional expertise than anticipated, or did not conform to procedures specified in the Guidelines. Activities frequently cited as problems were: (1) obtaining a reasonable response rate for the community survey; (2) identifying goals; (3) determining sub-goals; and (4) preparing the survey instrument. Despite the fact that districts had access to consultants, state grants to cover costs, and Guidelines, the needs assessment was difficult, expensive, and time consuming. The importance of setting goals, committing time and money, hiring a consultant, and training a staff member to coordinate needs assessment were recommended. (Author/CP)

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PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED IN CONDUCTING AN ASSESSMENT OF EDUCATIONAL NEEDS IN SELECTED OHIO SCHOOL DISTRICTS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to gather information about the technical and administrative problems encountered by school personnel as they attempted to conduct an assessment of educational needs. Five Ohio school districts ranging in size from very small (under 3,000 students K-12) to very large (more than 25,000 students K-12) participated in the year-long study. The general procedure used to assess needs was the same in each school district.

Results of the study showed that school personnel in the five school districts encountered numerous and severe problems in completing the needs assessment activities.

Introduction

The literature regarding educational planning points out the importance of determining student educational needs as an early step in the planning process. Potential benefits from a systematic assessment of student needs are many, including a ranking of top priority needs in a given instructional setting and the active involvement of school and community personnel in educational planning.

Despite the many potential benefits, use of a systematic procedure to assess educational needs is not commonplace in schools. In discussing a procedure for needs assessment at the school district level, Jones and Sommers (1975) state that needs assessment is a process that is much discussed but rarely implemented in a systematic way in a public school system. Some possible explanations for this situation are (1) lack of familiarity with needs assessment techniques on the part of school personnel, (2) concerns of administrators about the amount of time, expense, and expertise required to conduct a needs assessment, and (3) the number of technical and administrative problems which need to be overcome to conduct a needs assessment.

In this study, it was desired to gather information about the technical and administrative problems associated with a needs assessment by monitoring the implementation of a prepared needs assessment procedure in five Ohio school districts. The procedure followed in these districts is described in the Ohio Needs Assessment Guidelines, a publication by the Ohio Department of Education. In addition, information was collected about the level of expenditures, amount of professional and clerical staff time, and amount of consultant assistance needed to complete the needs assessment.

The study was conducted during the 1975-76 school year.

Background of the Study

Administrative personnel in the five districts which participated in this study had indicated their interest in conducting a needs assessment by submitting applications to the Ohio Department of Education for funds designated for needs assessment activities. These five districts were among thirteen districts which actually received grants from these special funds. Grants awarded to the five districts ranged in size from approximately $10,000 to $24,000. As part of the grant terms and conditions, the districts had to partially match the funds with in-kind contributions (e.g., professional and clerical staff time). The effective grant period was from June 1, 1975 to June 30, 1976.

As an additional condition for these grants, the districts were required to implement the needs assessment procedure described in the Ohio Needs Assessment Guidelines. This procedure consisted of the following steps:

1. Establish a needs assessment committee.
2. Prepare statements of educational goals.
3. Conduct a survey to determine perceived educational needs.
4. Assign priorities to perceived educational needs.
5. Set desired levels of student achievement on top priority perceived needs.
6. Ascertain actual status of student achievement.
7. Compare actual status with desired levels of student achievement.
8. Assign priorities to educational needs.

This procedure was to be implemented on a district-wide basis.

The guidelines provided instructions for completing each of these steps. In addition, districts were permitted to obtain consultant assistance with grant funds. District personnel were not given training in the needs assess-

ment procedure as part of the process for administering the grants at the state level.

Student enrollment in the five districts ranged from very small (fewer than 3,000 students K-12) to very large (more than 25,000 students K-12). District personnel who were assigned to coordinate the needs assessment activities varied considerably in the level of training and experience in research and evaluation techniques. Those personnel in the smaller districts had little or no such training while those in the larger districts had graduate level training and experience in these areas.

Procedure

The bulk of the data needed to complete the study was collected through two personal interviews with the needs assessment coordinator at each district. Using a prepared questionnaire, the researcher asked the coordinators about the actual needs assessment activities they had conducted and about the problem areas they had encountered. The first interview was held about midway through the needs assessment with the second interview being held following the completion of needs assessment activities.

Following the interviews, the problem areas at each test site were content analyzed by the researcher. A summary was made of the problem areas related to each of 15 specific activities which made up the eight major steps of the needs assessment procedure. These activities were considered problem areas if they met one or more of the following conditions:

a. Completion of the activity required more time and/or money than was anticipated by the needs assessment director.

b. Completion of the activity required professional expertise not available at the test site.

c. The activity could not be completed to the satisfaction of the needs assessment director.

d. The activity could not be completed using procedures specified in the Ohio Needs Assessment Guidelines.

Additional information needed to complete the study was collected from the reports and other documents generated by each district during the needs assessment.

Results

Table 1 shows the activities which were considered problem areas at each district (site). As indicated in Table 1, personnel at each district encountered problems during the needs assessment, and each needs assessment activity with but one exception was considered a problem area in at least one district. As is also indicated by Table 1, two of the districts did not complete all of the activities during the year in which this study was conducted.

Among the activities that were completed at all test sites, specific activities which were considered most frequently as problem areas were (1) obtaining a reasonable response rate from parents and community members when conducting the survey, (2) identifying educational goals, (3) determining sub-goals, and (4) preparing the survey instrument. Setting desired levels of student performance and selecting adequate assessment instruments were considered problem areas at two of the three sites completing these activities. Two of the test sites did not complete these two activities.

Among the activities that were completed at all test sites, those activities which were considered least frequently as problem areas were (1) administering the survey instrument, (2) determining the weighting procedure used in analyzing the data, (3) ranking the perceived needs, and (4) selecting areas for further assessment. Comparing desired levels with assessment results was not considered a problem area at any of the three sites completing this activity. Two of the test sites did not complete this activity.

In addition to the technical problems with the needs assessment activities, the needs assessment coordinators experienced other problems related to admini-

Table 1. Problem Areas Encountered at Each Test Site.

Needs Assessment Activities	PROBLEM AREAS[a] Site[b] 1	Site 2	Site 3	Site 4	Site 5
Appointing a Needs Assessment Committee	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
Identifying Goals	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
Determining Sub-Goals	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
Preparing Survey Instrument	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Administering the Instrument	Yes	No	No	No	No
Obtaining Reasonable Response Rate	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Analyzing the Survey Data	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Determining Weighting Procedures	No	No	No	No	Yes
Ranking Perceived Needs	No	Yes	No	No	No
Selecting Areas for Further Assessment	No	Yes	No	No	No
Setting Desired Performance Levels	Yes	Yes	N.C.	No	N.C.
Selecting Adequate Assessment Instrument	Yes	Yes	N.C.	No	N.C.
Conducting Actual Assessment	Yes	No	N.C.	No	N.C.
Comparing Desired and Actual Levels	No	No	N.C.	No	N.C.
Ranking Actual Need Areas	No	Yes	N.C.	No	N.C.

a Key: Yes indicates the activity was a problem.
No indicates the activity was not a problem.
N.C. indicates the activity was not completed.

b Site 1 is a large urban school district, Site 2 is a small rural-suburban school district, Site 3 is a small rural district, Site 4 is a small rural district, Site 5 is a medium-sized suburban school district.

stration of the various activities. All of the coordinators felt that the time required to coordinate the needs assessment activities was much greater than they had anticipated. As a result, the implementation of the needs assessment fell behind schedule. At two of the districts, the needs assessment had not been completed by the end of the grant period.

Another problem experienced at many of the districts was that of working with the needs assessment committee. This committee was to be made up of representatives of various school and community groups and was to have the responsibility for making many of the decisions regarding the needs assessment (e.g., grade level to be assessed, preparation of goals, and selection of top priority needs). The coordinators found it difficult to convene the committees as often as needed and to have good attendance at the meeting. As a result, the coordinators found it necessary to make many of the decisions without proper input from the committee members.

The coordinators also experienced some problems with the needs assessment because of their lack of experience with such activities. This was especially apparent in the districts which did not have personnel with training and experience in educational research and evaluation techniques.

The amount of time spent by various personnel and the total cost of the needs assessment at each site are shown in Table 2. The stated costs do not

Table 2. Time and Costs Required to Complete the Needs Assessment at Each District.

District	Coordinators' Time	Clerical Time	Consultant Time	Total Cost
Site 1	270 hrs.	480 hrs.	16 hrs.	$23,431
Site 2	320 hrs.	320 hrs.	56 hrs.	15,613
Site 3	80 hrs.	80 hrs.	0 hrs.	5,526
Site 4	360 hrs.	0 hrs.	50 hrs.	10,715
Site 5	100 hrs.	120 hrs.	0 hrs.	6,567

include the cost of the coordinators' time as this was considered an in-kind contribution to the needs assessment project.

Summary, Discussion and Recommendations

Results of this study showed that numerous technical and administrative problems were encountered by school district personnel as they conducted a systematic assessment of student educational needs. Specific needs assessment activities which created especially difficult problems for school personnel were (1) surveying community perceptions of needs, (2) establishing educational goals, (3) specifying desired levels of student performance, and (4) assessing student performance. The various administrative problems encountered during the needs assessment resulted in serious slippage of timelines and non-completion of the needs assessment in two of the five districts.

It is important to note that these problems were encountered even though conditions for conducting the needs assessment were nearly ideal. The districts had funds from special state grants to cover the costs involved with the needs assessment. Consultant assistance could be obtained with the funds so lack of expertise on the part of school personnel did not have to hinder the effort. School officials in preparing the grant applications had stated specific reasons why they were interested in conducting a needs assessment and had committed relatively large amounts of staff time to the needs assessment activities. A prepared needs assessment procedure with instructions for its completion was available to guide school personnel.

Even under these conditions, school personnel encountered numerous and severe problems in conducting the needs assessment. The findings indicate that a systematic assessment of student educational needs is a difficult, expensive, and time-consuming process. It seems likely that this type of needs assessment will not be a part of the planning process in most school districts.

For school districts which wish to follow the needs assessment procedure used by the districts participating in this study, the following recommendations are given:

a. A list of educational goals should be prepared to serve as a basis for the needs assessment.

b. School officials should be willing to commit an adequate level of staff time and financial resources to the needs assessment effort. (Findings from this study suggest that a 25% to 50% time coordinator and from $10,000 to $25,000 additional funds will be required.)

c. A trained consultant should be hired to assist with specific needs assessment tasks requiring expertise not available in the school system.

d. Coordinators of the needs assessment should attend a workshop session on needs assessment activities prior to initiating the needs assessment.

References

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